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Reagan signs, but favors resort

Bill blocks Mineral King road in High Sierra

SACRAMENTO (AP) — Gov. Reagan has signed a bill blocking construction of a high speed road into Mineral King, a remote High Sierra valley, his office said Friday.

Reagan said at the same time he still favors development of a controversial Walt Disney Productions resort in the valley.

The bill, by Assemblyman Edwin Z'berg, D-Sacramento, deletes a proposed 14-mile section of California 276 running from Three Rivers in Tulare County into the Mineral King valley. Z'berg has said the road would cost about $40 million. A very rough and steep road now is the only vehicle access to the valley.

"I want to stress as strongly as possible," Reagan said in a message on the signing, "that I am firmly in support of the development of Mineral King as a recreation area."

However, he said, he was convinced "that proper future development will not be hampered by lack of access by a high speed road."

Reagan's action was immediately hailed by the president of the Sierra Club, Raymond J. Sherwin.

The signing was "farsighted," Sherwin said, and "consistent with his leadership recently in halting federal funding for the proposed Minarets Summit road, saving the John Muir Trail and the great de facto wilderness of the San Joaquin River country."

The conservation organization has spearheaded efforts to prevent the proposed $35 million Disney development in Mineral King, which is part of Sierra National Forest.

The Disney plans — approved by the U.S. Forest Service which has jurisdiction over the valley — originally called for construction of a four-lane road into the valley to give access to camping, fishing and hiking in the summer and skiing in the winter. In an effort to counter some of the outcry from conservationists, however, the plans were changed and now call for construction of a cog railway.

The railroad also would limit use of the valley to about 4,000 persons a day, Disney productions announced earlier this year.

The original plans — which included the road — envisioned some 14,000 persons a day. The smaller numbers also would scale down the size of the resort facilities, a Disney spokesman said.

One of the conservationist fears has been that a road would open the valley to saturation use such as Yosemite National Park and other forest parks now suffer.

Reagan said he had also instructed Frank Walton, head of the Business and Transportation Agency, and Norman B. Livermore Jr., head of the Resources Agency, "to develop a study on the economics and esthetics of the key roads that furnish automobile approaches to the High Sierra wilderness areas."

He said he wanted their report by January.

The High Sierra generally refers to the wilderness area extending southward from Tioga Pass in Tuolumne County to Walker Pass in Kern County.

Included is the area known as the Minarets Corridor, in Madera County, also a longtime subject of controversy between conservationists and road builders. Reagan recently asked President Nixon to intervene to prevent construction of a trans-Sierra highway through the Minarets and has asked the California congressional delegation to seek legislation closing the area to cars and protecting the John Muir Trail, which runs north and south along the ridge of the High Sierra.

"Such action," Reagan said, "will insure preservation of the largest and finest wilderness area in the coterminous United States."